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The "machine of entrepreneurship": the crisis in Portugal and a critical discourse analysis through the Theatre of the Oppressed

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship has made its way into dominant discourse through the production and dissemination of a series of intertwined narratives – “employment is a thing of the past”, “we can’t be tied to the state”, “unemployment is an opportunity” – and its transposition to public policy, non-governmental organisations, schools and universities. Since the emergence of the global crisis, in 2008, and its financial, economic and social impact in Portugal, the “Education for entrepreneurship” has been implemented by several programmes conducted by municipalities, associations, companies, etc. Even schools’ curricula, since de early years, are now including this area under the rules of the Ministry of Education. Within a public sociology, a critical discourse analysis and a participatory action-research, this paper describes and interprets an experience with the Theatre of the Oppressed, more concretely a performance called “The machine of entrepreneurship”, aiming at contributing to the deconstruction of the discourse of “entrepreneurship” – its strategies, objectives, contexts as well as its contradictions – and also promoting a critical education perspective. Research findings show the ideological nature of the entrepreneurship discourse; its role on changing forms of exploitation, dominance and control in society, moving from a classical meaning to a more seductive one; and especially the ways by which the “education for entrepreneurship” has been taking the place of “education for citizenship” in schools.

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1. Introduction

The economic and financial crisis that erupted in the United States in 2008, and was intensified in Portugal by three years of Troika intervention and the austerity policies it spawned, has greatly affected people's lives in areas such as social protection, health, culture, education, employment, amongst others. (Reis, 2013) In this period, entrepreneurship discourse has spread abundantly in many ways and in different contexts: in public employment and education policies, in the media's agenda, in vocational training, in non-governmental organizations or in universities and schools.

The question of labour is essential in the way our lives are governed and how we perceive the future, therefore the legitimization of labour exploitation processes and the increase of precarity thrive in the mist of fear and insecurity (Estanque et al 2013; Soeiro, 2014). Currently the "exploited are not only those who produce or 'create', but also those condemned not to 'create'" (Zizek 2012: 19), so that today there are millions of potential workers who "call out to corporations: "Please exploit us!" (McLaren, 2007: 33).

The discourses of entrepreneurship and austerity seem thus to reinforce each other as part of a "political-ideological project for reconfiguring society" and in particular the world of labour. (Ferreira 2012: 11, 12). According to this author, the sociological specificity of the austerity society concept has to do precisely with the notion that it is "through individuals and their subjective and objective difficulties that solutions can be found for a crisis made up of nebulous financial markets, the State's deficit and the economic and social models followed in recent years". Portrayed as inevitable, austerity measures are reflected as "punishment for individuals", the "erosion of social rights" and "economic liberalization of society", imposed and spread through the inculcation of guilt, the use of blackmail and the "social construction of fear" (ibid, ibidem).

Language is not neutral (Bourdieu, 1996; Breton, 1999), conveying, on the contrary, ideological purposes marked by power, domination and social control. This discourse does not only reflect social relations, but it also builds new ones. This is what we mean when we refer to entrepreneurship. Besides, in times of crisis, the basic power of language and its effects are more visible because, as Bourdieu stresses (1996: 119): "extraordinary situations require extra-ordinary discourses." At the same time, both the discourse of austerity and that of entrepreneurship have come to increase individualization, social fragmentation and the weakening of collective solidarity and citizenship. Therefore, we need forms of resistance that will allow us, firstly, to analyse critically and deconstruct the prevailing discourse and, secondly, to contribute to the creation of learning and convivial spaces (Illich, 1973) that will enable the exercise of a defiant and nonconformist citizenship through collective action. That's what we have tried to build with the practice of the Theatre of the Oppressed.

The Theatre of the Oppressed is a political, educational and social intervention methodology, created in the early 1970s by Augusto Boal during the Brazilian dictatorship (Boal, 2009; 2010). He was influenced by Bertolt Brecht, in the theatrical area and by Paulo Freire, in the educational field. This theatre seeks to break the division of social roles, providing access to the production and culture to all, and at the same time, contributing to awareness, through a critical, creative, collective and compromised dialogue. Through games, theatrical exercises and different techniques, we seek to emphasize and analyse the mechanisms of oppression and current power structures, aiming to transform them in an emancipatory sense. Based on the Marxist principle that we need tools that not only interpret reality, but also enable its transformation, the theatre of the oppressed rises from its inception as a "rehearsal for revolution": in it, forms of resistance and protest are rehearsed in order to be taken outside the theatrical action and give way to concrete, social and continued actions (Boal, 2009; 2010).

Guided by this idea, we embarked on this research within the context of an experiment by the Theatre of the Oppressed group (Nucleo de Teatro do Oprimido - NTO) of Braga, Portugal, in cooperation with other groups and social movements. Using the Theatre of the Oppressed as an activistic tool, we have tried to deconstruct the discourse of entrepreneurship from the metaphor of the "machine", emphasising its mechanisms, sources and resources used to achieve certain social effects.

2. A critically engaged activist research

Files From February 2013 until today, a research group has been formed, made up of about ten elements of the Theatre of the Oppressed groups of Braga and Porto and two representatives of the Inflexible Precariat (Precários Inflexíveis).

In conformity with a radical and activist action-research (Schostak, 2008; Hale, 2008), and critical education (McLaren, 2007; Giroux, 2011), and subscribing to a public and militant sociology (Burawoy, 2006), what we display here is part of a collective research. This has emerged from the experience of a group, so in certain parts of the text, the first person plural - "we" - is used, not in the form of conventional academic writing, but out of respect for the collective creation of ideas and interventions.

It was during the Meeting for Activism and the Theatre of the Oppressed (Oprima - Encontro de Teatro do Oprimido e Ativismo) – which gathered in Braga, in February 2013, nearly fifty activists of various causes and from different parts of the country – that the allegory of the "entrepreneurship machine" was conceived, a theatrical performance that served as a starting point for this research. The proposal was born of a workshop with Julian Boal, from an exercise called "allegorical sequence of analysis", whose goal is to analyse a certain problem, concept or system through metaphorical language. Our group wanted to discuss "entrepreneurship", particularly during the crisis and austerity period we live in. Using sound, image and rhythm, we were required to answer six questions: Where are the interactions of power? What are the strategies used to perpetuate that power? Who benefits or takes advantage of it? What does this concept hide? What is the origin of the problem? And where are its contradictions? The result was the aforementioned theatrical performance, lasting eight minutes, through which we symbolically presented some of the ideas we considered to be connected and that we wanted to deconstruct: the new forms of capitalist exploitation; blackmail by fear of unemployment; manipulation by the media and government and the lack of public policies on employment and social protection.

This "entrepreneurship machine" performance inspired a research project using different languages and in different areas: participation in demonstrations, organizing debates, the creation of a forum theatre play, Theatre of the Oppressed workshops and direct action and protest, working together with a Theatre of the Oppressed group from Oporto, "Talking Turtle" (Tartaruga Falante); the association to combat precarity, "Inflexible Precariat" (Precários Inflexíveis) and the Platform "To Hell with Troika". From the very beginning, we have tried to deconstruct the discourse of entrepreneurship as a means of legitimizing the austerity policies.

During this research, there has been frequent exchange and sharing of official documents, news items and reports about the issues in question, for a deepening and collective reflection. The fact that, within this group, there are three researchers carrying out academic work on the subject has contributed to the continuation of the project, informing, on one hand, our scientific production, and on the other hand, social and political intervention. This article presents the resulting theoretical consideration of the experience with the Theatre of the Oppressed, and also a content analysis of material that we have collected, particularly the "Guide to the 1st Job", from Student Forum magazine, and the guidelines on Education for Entrepreneurship, organized by the Executive General for Innovation and Curriculum Development.

The data shown below emphasises how entrepreneurial discourse has been disseminated in the fields of employment and education in Portugal.

3. "You are the product!": the praise of entrepreneurship in a context of crisis and austerity

"Change the sale of your product! Which product?! You are the product! You do not have a price! You are worth the value that companies give you. You cannot stop! An inert product is a devalued product!" (Poster, 27.02.2013).

This poster, which displayed the typical American figure of Uncle Sam – I want you! – announced a lecture on entrepreneurship organized by a company in cooperation with a university student's union. To reinforce the violence of this speech that reduces human beings into a product, the poster was used for the presentation of "entrepreneurship machine", opening the demonstration of March 2nd, 2013, in Braga, summoned by the Platform

"To Hell with Troika". On the "Guide to the 1st job", 2014 (Portugal, "Guia do 1º Emprego 2014"), the instructions are clear: "You are your own curriculum!" "Next candidate? You"; "The stage is yours!", "You can do it!" "Show the whole Europe what you're capable of!" In fact, the encouragement to emigrate is quite evident in all the pages of the magazine: "Can I fly further?", "We must keep the Portuguese nature and leave like discoverers in search of adventure and challenge."

The excerpt of that poster - "you are the product!" - refers to a concept of the worker as a commodity. It is also expressed in the Guide, when it mentions that the main skill that employers consider lacking in a candidate is precisely "commercial awareness": "It is a fact that in our society, there are those who think that the commercial function is limited to professionals in the field of sales. Wrong." (...) Any professional should always be a salesperson. He "sells his image and skills", he "sells his ideas internally", he "works to persuade customers" and he "is evaluated by his contribution to added value and profits from sales." The individual is thus restrained by the force of myths (Freire, 1979b: 54) constructing himself with an aim to personal marketing: the child, the young person or the unemployed woman are required to change their attitude, to promote themselves, to sell themselves, but to remain a subject, if only to be assigned responsibility for their failures.

Entrepreneurship propagates, in a seductive and seemingly unquestionable way, as the solution to all the troubles of society, from economy to employment and education. Ideas such as "employment is a thing of the past", "we cannot be attached to the State", "what matters is the attitude", "unemployment is an opportunity," "it is crucial to promote early in students an entrepreneurial culture", have been magnified by the media and used politically with various goals and strategies. For example, the editorial of the "Guide to the 1st Job 2014", published by Student's Forum magazine, a monthly magazine with a distribution of 30,000 copies, is enlightening as to the extent of the ideology of entrepreneurship, "no complaining, no defeatism (...) in difficult times, your attitude will make a difference."

Mixing facts, fiction and ideology, supporting itself in the reproduction of success stories, the "discourse of failure is silently produced in the form of the unproductive, the sterile, the idle, the professionally unqualified" (Costa, 2010: 257). The "praise of entrepreneurship" focuses the reasons for unemployment, exploitation and precarious work on the flaws of individuals, "whether in terms of qualifications, or in terms of skills and character (initiative, risk taking, resilience)" (Soeiro, 2014). The "confined man" of a restraining society becomes the "indebted man" in the society of control (Deleuze, 1992). That is, the coercion of restraining societies gives place to the seduction of control societies, using marketing as one of its main instruments: in addition to being good at explaining and convincing, it is required of the individual to know how to seduce and dominate.

The repetition of these ideas in the institutional, political, and media domains gives an impression of self-evidence and inevitability to the austerity measures. It is the individual that carries all the responsibility, because it is supposed to be only a matter of "attitude". In this way, the idea is propagated that individuals that give up, quit the fight, or lay back and wait, will not be able to work; and those who can, will have to fight to keep proving that they are great and successful, as entrepreneurship education claims.

4. The entrepreneurship education: learning to compete by learning to obey

In Portugal, the latest report of the "Observatory of Educational and Training Policies" (Benavente et al, 2014), in keeping with its predecessors, presents a very negative scenario as to what it calls the "State of education in an intervened State." The report demonstrates, firstly, the lack of investment in public education (expenses on education at 3.8%, the lowest of the European Union; increase in the number of students per class; growing number of working hours for teachers; dismissing of thousands of teachers) and, secondly, the investment in an educational model which, in the opinion of the authors, "reflects the submission to neoliberal principles where competition, evaluation, regulation by the rules of supply and demand and competitiveness are sacred", mobilising the "market and the private sector (currently entitled entrepreneurship)."

Children and youngsters have been the main targets of the entrepreneurship discourse and the policies that dwell on it. Based on the fact that "it is early in life that entrepreneurial culture is learned", several courses and workshops have been created for children, and even babies, aiming to encourage the necessary skills for entrepreneurship: initiative, resilience, autonomy, competitiveness and many others. In 2014, we even witnessed the launch of

Entrepreneurial Barbie ("if you can dream it, you can be it") and the children's book "Mister Entrepreneurship" was circulated in schools, intending to teach small children the qualities of a leader. As for youths, who are the social group most affected by unemployment, entrepreneurship discourse finds fertile ground for its diffusion and acceptance.

The entrepreneurship education was first introduced by the current Ministry of Education and Science in the non-curricular area of Educating for Citizenship.

However, in recent years it has entered schools in different ways, more scattered and therefore more difficult to map. From programs made by districts and towns - Enterprising Schools of Cascais - industrial associations - Entrepreneur Children's Workshops; non-profit organizations - Junior Achievement Portugal (Chaves and Parente, 2011); or companies - Small Entrepreneurs, by Science for You, there are many and varied initiatives, globally suggesting an approximation between schools - municipalities - companies, conveyed in engagements and partnerships, revealing adherence not only to the motto but also to the ideology that it spreads.

Regarding public policy, there is the National Project of Education for Entrepreneurship, one of the few examples, which started in 2006, ending in 2009, when it was restructured, relying exclusively on "schools which aimed to find the partnerships, means and resources required" to promote it. (Teixeira, 2012: 52). By that time, the templates of Education for Entrepreneurship (2006) and Promoting Entrepreneurship in Schools (2007) were produced. Here we focus especially on the 2007 document. Based on the European Round Table of Industrials (ERT), the speakers say: "The goal is to promote early in the students an entrepreneurial culture that goes beyond risk taking aversion and the stigma of failure, still prevalent in the culture and repeatedly identified as a major constraining factor in economic activity. "

They continue, saying that "the capacity for entrepreneurship is not an intrinsic and natural gift", "nor is it inscribed in our genetic code", so that, to achieve "equality of opportunities", it is necessary to work in schools, with students, to develop those skills that promote "competitive spirit", "eagerness for risk", "initiative", "leadership", among others.

By analysing this script - as well as the earlier documents - we can consider the main aspects:

1) education for entrepreneurship emerges to satisfy the demand of economic and business groups, that complain about the current gaps in the skills of their employees; 2) the blame for this lack of skill lies on the educational system; 3) school aims to prepare human resources that are able to adapt to the labour market; 4) as such, education submits primarily to business interests; 5) there is a strategy around this project on the part of the European Union, namely the political agenda of "lifelong learning".

As Lima states (2010; 2012), this agenda has made education subservient to the adjustment of the economy to the new capitalism, establishing deterministic relationships between education, productivity and economic modernization. These market-inspired public policies and their managerial mechanisms are based on the ideas of "learning to win" and "knowing in order to compete" (Lima, 2010, 2012). This subjugation of education to the needs of economic competitiveness manifests itself in several ways: "training human resources", "qualifying the work force", etc., considering the entrepreneurship education, and the related concepts of employability, competitiveness, competence, quality, excellence, and others, as the way to learn to compete by learning to obey.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The core principle of a machine is simple: a set of combined engines that use energy and work to achieve a certain goal. Using the metaphor of the "entrepreneurship machine", we tried, in this article, to emphasize the way it is processed, particularly in a context of recession, of changes in the work world, and of crisis on several levels: political, economic or social. The energy and the work that induces this machine to function and get results lies largely in the apologetics of entrepreneurship, and of the individual, the entrepreneur, who, embodying "the new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999), reproduces and propagates its ideas. Besides, this energy also results from the social control and domination that entrepreneurship implies, by constantly demanding from the individual to be excellent - to be more efficient, to be more productive, to adapt, to take risks - focusing on him all the expectations and responsibilities. Through mechanisms, such as the production and diffusion of a series of

dominant narratives and the spread of these narratives into public policy, into schools, into the programs of non-governmental organizations, into university programs, entrepreneurship spreads as a hegemonic discourse.

Preying on the fear, insecurity, and lack of future prospects which run through contemporary Portuguese society, the "enchanted kingdom of entrepreneurship" offers solutions where only void, lowered arms and dead ends seem to be found. These solutions do not emerge without their own pitfalls. We seem to be witnessing a process of social restructuring which reflects the intentions of this discourse: the legitimization of processes leading to precarious work and labour exploitation; individualization and social fragmentation; weakening of collective solidarity; and the loss of citizenship values, are some of them.

As we perceive in all machines and systems, there are contradictions, some areas where we may act and from which we can move to methods of resistance and alternative directions. This is what we have tried to do with this cooperative research.

The experience with the Theatre of the Oppressed has allowed us, first of all, to create a time and a space for collective reflection and discussion, which, through dialectical thought and a pedagogy of conflict (Gadotti, 1995), enables the setting into motion of a process of conscientization (Freire, 1979a). The exercises and theatrical games, the use of metaphorical language and the tools for analysing power and social structures that the methodology places at our disposal contribute to counter "brain invasion" (Boal, 2010), to dismantle and expose the machinery and the oppressive systems.

Since the Theatre of the Oppressed is centred on dialogue and not on the oppressor's monologue, it is also a powerful tool to clarify and deconstruct hegemonic discourses.

To deconstruct certain concepts that circulate in the business, media and education areas - competence, employability, excellence, quality, etc. - and recover others that the hegemonic language presents as outdated - exploitation, oppression, domination, class struggle, employment, rights - is an exercise that already seems to carry an emancipating feature. By focusing on the analysis of contradictions and on spaces of resistance, our work also allows us to contribute to one of the greatest contemporary challenges: fighting the feeling of inevitability and resignation. In this "dark time" (Giroux, 2011: 5-6), it is necessary to "mobilize the imagination" and develop a "language of possibility" combined with the "language of criticism and hope" that allows the construction of a counter-hegemony.

In the context of a militant struggle, the experience of the Theatre of the Oppressed proves fruitful for a critical education, sustained through participation, research and collective action. Enabling a revolutionary praxis (Mayo, 1999: 160), it is a form of criticism anchored in a rebellious and emancipatory theoretical discourse (Afonso, 2001; Santos, 2000).

The partnerships that this participating research team made with some groups and social movements; the broadening of spaces and languages (in demonstrations, meetings, discussions...); or even the transformation of that experience into academic material, illustrate a collective effort of resistance, renouncing the closed space of the workshop and focusing on the public space of citizenship. In this sense, the activist experience with Theatre of the Oppressed, by contributing to the disassembling of the "entrepreneurship machine" and many other oppressive machineries, can gather liberating energies that counter the fear and resignation that are accentuated in these times of crisis and austerity.

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